DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 459 CS 203 674

AUTHOR Griffin, Claudius W.
TITLE The Decline in Writing Ability--What the Secondary Teacher Needs to Know How to Teach.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; College School Cooperation; College Teachers; *Composition Skills (Literary); *Educational Trends; *English Instruction; Literature Reviews; Secondary Education; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Back to Basics

ABSTRACT

This paper cites articles in the popular press that agree that there is a "writing crisis" in the United States, and it notes the lack of general agreement on solutions for the problem. Articles by writers in the English profession are then examined with reference to the writers' views on the seriousness of the writing crisis, reasons for the crisis, and possible solutions. The paper notes that teachers of writing are beginning to feel enormous pressure to teach students to write well, and it suggests that secondary teachers, who have never been trained to teach writing, will undoubtedly respond to the pressure by reverting to whatever forms of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics they know how to teach. College teachers, who have been trained partly by serving as teaching assistants, have developed some successful methods for teaching writing, which should be taught to secondary teachers to prevent them from returning to a misguided set of basics. The paper lists 12 techniques and principles that college teachers have learned. (GW)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED145459

The Decline in Writing Ability--What the Secondary Teacher Needs to Know How to Teach

Claudius W. Griffin

Last September in a speech to the Texas Joint Council of Teachers of English, Districts I & II, Jim Corder said:

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

> But the strangest, potentially most ominous thing I note about the demand for a "return to the basics" is that it is already noncontroversial. The phrase already has a magical ring. It has power. The presumed need to return to the basics no longer has to be validated. A teacher or a department can acquire virtue just by saying, "We're going to return to the basics" (CE, p. 477).

Because I think what Corder says is true (and frightening), I want to examine the back-to-the-basics movement closely, looking first at what the public thinks about it and then at how the profession has responded to it. Finally, I want to suggest one action we can take about the back-to-the-basics movement--immediately.

Almost unanimously, writers in the Reader's Digest, Time Magazine, Newsweek, the Saturday Review, Redbook, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and even my hometown newspaper, the Richmond Times-Dispatch, agree that students in our schools and colleges can no longer write clearly or effectively. In a recent Reader's Digest article, for example, Vance Packard laments "the general low state of literacy and ability to write clearly among youngsters and older people alike" (April, 1974, p. 82). Time Magazine finds "a new brainlessness in public language that coincides with a frightening ineptitude for reading and writing among the young" (Time, August 25, 1975, p. 34). And Newsweek puts it most baldly: "Willy-nilly," it says "the U.S. Educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates" (Dec. 8, 1975, p. 58).

Most writers in the popular press also cite the same evidence for what we can call a "writing crisis." For statistical evidence, some cite the National Assessment of Educaticnal Progress, which reported in 1974 that 13- and 17-year olds "wrote in a more 'primer-like' style, with more run-on sentences, and with

CS203674

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Claudius W. Griffin TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

more incoherent paragraphs than did the same age groups in 1970 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, p. 32), or they cite the forty-one point decline in SAT verbal scores since 1963. They refer also to authorities such as the president of New York's Bard College; J. Mitchell Morse, a professor of English at Temple University; Jacques Barzun of Columbia University; Ronald Berman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities; the philologist Mario Pei; the general semanticist S. I. Hayakawa, or more popular writers such as James Dickey or E. B. White. (Interestingly, no secondary school teachers, freshman English teachers, or linguists are cited.) Some refer to comments made by professors of business schools or executives of large companies. Finally, many refer to the number of new writing programs being developed, even at such prestigious universities as the University of California, Harvard, and Cornell.

Most commentators even agree generally about the causes for the crisis. Many agree with Professor A. Bartlett Giamatti, whose article was first printed in the Yale Alumni Magazine and was subsequently reprinted in the Washington Post. Giamatti finds the principal cause in the reaction against the restrictions, subtleties, and complexities of language fostered by the "corrosive sentimentality" of the youth and freedom movement of the 1960's (Washington Post, January 25, 1976, p. F7). With the exception of Margaret Mead, writing in Redbook, most agree that watching TV is a major cause, both because it occupies time which might otherwise be devoted to reading and because it encourages passivity. Al to this is the feeling that most people in a highly technological society simply do not value written language. Interestingly, most writers hesitate to blame secondary or college teachers, although some blame "permissive" schools of education or new theories about language.

But when commentators in the popular press come to solutions for the problem, there is no such general agreement. In fact, the same writers who are quick to

identify the problem and its causes are much less confident about solutions. Newsweek suggests that we teach teachers to write as well as to teach writing. It mentions also efforts at teaching English as a foreign language and the writing program at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, which stresses traditional grammar and usage. Sloan Wilson, on the other hand, writing in the Saturday Review (September 18, 1976), attacks the teaching of grammar because it is boring and nonproductive and suggests we teach good literature and writing instead. Writing in Redbook, Margaret Mead suggests that we stop being so anxious about our children's education and simply establish a nationwide expectation that all children can and will be taught to be literate (November, 1976).

The responses of writers in the profession to the writing decline are perhaps more varied than those of the public. Richard Ohmann, in The Chronicle of Higher Education (October 5, 1976), denies that there even is a crisis, at least as the media have presented it, and calls it rather "a media-created event." Professor Richard Lloyd-Jones, in the University of Iowa Spectator (April, 1976), finds a fog of false claims by public critics. "The sad truth," he says, "is that the public wailing about the quality of writing has far more to say about the personality and motives of those who are moaning than it does about the quality of writing."

But almost all other commentators within the profession accept without equivocation the view that we are experiencing a serious decline in the level of our students' writing abilities. Writing in The Chronicle of Higher Education, two freshman English teachers complain about their students' inability to write--one wishes she didn't have to teach freshman composition and the other dreads the pile of blue books she will have to slash with red pencil. Gene Lyons, in his "The Higher Illiteracy" published in Harper's in September, 1976, admits that "even those of us who would prefer to disregard the coming of a plague of semi-literacy must find the evidence persuasive" and "that the language is in trouble."

Even Suzette Haden Elgin, who vehemently attacks most of Newsweek's statements in a recent issue of English Journal, admits "that the quality of student writing, measured across today's mass student population against what is called "Standard English" is far lower today that it was a generation ago. That is indisputable" (EJ, November, 1976, p. 30). And in an interview published recently in College English, both William Lutz, Director of Freshman English at Rutgers University, and Edward M. White, professor of English at California State College at San Bernadino and a recognized authority in composition, agree that student writing skills have declined appreciably (CE, 38, #5, January, 1977, 466-467).

Generally, writers in the profession blame English teachers themselves for the crisis. Gene Lyons, in Harper's, blames college professors, who prefer to write about and teach literature, rather than teach writing. Others blame the high-school elective system and the fact that high school teachers are not trained to teach writing. At times, groups within the profession have even blamed each other. In the Winter, 1976, issue of English Education, Alfred J. Lindsey calls freshman composition programs taught by English departments "chauvinistic, unprofessional, and finally irresponsible" and recommends that new departments of literacy be created to do what English departments have failed to do (p. 112-117). And, as Donald McQuade in the English Journal notes, college teachers are all too ready to blame high school teachers, who in turn blame elementary teachers, who in turn blame parents, who, of course, blame all of us. Today, we seem to divide our time between beating our breasts and attacking each other.

But the profession, I'm afraid, isn't able to tell us how to resolve the crisis. With the exception of a few teachers such as Charles R. Cyr, who in a talk to the CCCC in 1975 at Saint Louis recommended that we return to teaching the basic eight parts of speech, the phrase, clause, basic expository essay form, etc., most commentators warn us of the dangers of the basic's movement rather than suggest solutions.

In a recent issue of College English, Thomas J. Farrell says that "the basics movement is misguided" (p. 454); Elizabeth Cowan feels that the emphasis on prescriptive grammar, traditional rhetorical principles, and mechanical skills with their roots in the past begs important questions such as "Are we teaching the same kinds of students as in the past, are students going to college for the same reasons, and are the missions of higher education the same now as they used to be?" (p. 464). Finally, Jim Corder warns us that "the public outcry for a return to the basics is a single vision, simplistic, partially at least a wordy attempt to return to some strange Golden Age of forty or fifty or one-hundred years ago, a Golden Age that never existed" (p.481).

I've discussed the basics movement in some detail because I want my hearers to understand what has been happening in it. But where are we right now? In essence, almost all of us are agreed that we have a serious problem--our children don't write very well. But we cannot agree about solutions. The public suggests simplistic ones, and we, sometimes out of fear, constantly talk about the dangers of this or that, about the things we should not do. We have a kind of vacuum, plenty of pressure to solve a problem but no workable solution.

What's going to happen? Or more accurately, what is happening? Sure enough, teachers of writing, both in high school and college, are beginning to feel enormous pressure. Parents, supervisors, and others are demanding that we teach students to write clearly and correctly. Recently, I conducted a workshop in teaching writing for secondary school teachers from a nearby town. When introducing me, the principal informed the whole English faculty that they'd better begin to teach students how to write or he'd get other teachers who could. Even at my university, faculty outside the English department are becoming more aware of deficiences in their students' writing. Just the other day, I met with a delegation (friendly yes, but still a delegation) from our school of education concerned about their students' writing ablilities. And our students, I've noticed, are asking

us to stress what they see as the real basics--grammar, punctuation, and mechanics.

Under such pressure to teach students to write, teachers will do something. But there is, I think, a difference between what college teachers will do and what high school teachers will do. For years, we college teachers have had at least an informal system of training ourselves to teach writing. Granted, most of us never took a course in how to teach composition, but we were trained through a kind of apprenticeship, trial-and-error system. By the time we had been teaching assistants for a couple of years, had used or at least referred to rhetoric texts such as McCrimmon or Brooks and Warren, and had received the advice and sympathy of colleagues and mentors, we had developed some successful methods for teaching composition.

But high school and junior high school teachers come from a different tradition altogether. Most have been trained to teach literature but not composition. When these teachers were undergraduates, neither English departments nor schools of education bothered to teach them how to teach writing. Yet these are the teachers who will feel most of the pressure from parents and supervisors to teach writing. What will they do? They'll do just what any of us would do in such circumstances--they'll revert to what they know about. Some may teach whole courses in grammar, labeling parts of speech, diagraming sentences, and correcting mistakes in exercise books. Others, with vague memories of their own college composition course, may teach "creative writing," "free writing," or require complex literary analysis. Still others may overemphasize sophisticated distinctions about usage--the difference between who and whom, affect and effect, or they'll spend as much time teaching how to punctuate restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses as they do teaching how to punctuate compound sentences. In short, they'll go back to whatever their version of the basics is.

And it will do little good for us to continue proclaiming that these aren't the basics. We can say with Thomas J. Farrell that "reading and writing are instrumental in increasing conceptual abilities and awareness. These are the essential things, the basics--not spelling, punctuation, grammar and all that jazz" (CE, p. 459). We can say, as a recent SLATE sheet did, that "the real basics are language processes." Or we can warn against the "inordinate emphasis" of the back-to-the-basics movement on traditional rhetorical principles, and on mechanical skills, as Elizabeth Cowan has done (CE, p. 464). But we won't do any good. A desperate and untrained high school teacher preparing students for the standardized test at the end of the year will teach whatever grammar, mechanics, and usage the test requires and he knows; a teacher who knows that the PA system may be cut on at any moment or the principal may enter his classroom at any hour will naturally grasp at whatever straw he can find--usually a handbook of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. The secondary teacher will do what the rest of us would do in such a situation--she'll do whatever she has to do to respond to the pressure.

My point is that we no longer have the luxury of time to tell teachers what not to do or to say we need to know more about this or that. Elizabeth Cowan talks about how much we need to learn about teaching grammar, rhetoric, and mechanics, and Jim Corder says that we need to discover what our subject matters are and to put them into some kind of order (CE, p. 480). All true. But while we're doing research at the forefront of composition, we should look back at our collective experience, we should teach what we already know to secondary teachers.

What do we know? We know, I think, the following:

1) How to set up an orderly sequence in composition, whether that sequence moves from word-sentence-paragraph-whole paper; sentence-paragraph-paper-word (or in any other progression).

2) That all effective writing is based on two skills--the ability to generalize about experience and the ability to utilize details from experience which amplify and support generalizations. And we know how to teach students to generalize precisely and use details concretely.

3) How to teach students to write sentences which are clear and effective--by using action verbs, concrete nouns, by deleting unnecessary words, "to be" constructions, passives; and by using sentence combining techniques to develop syntactic complexity and vary patterns.

4) How to teach effective paragraphing--stating topic sentences and supporting them with details in paragraphs which are unified, coherent, and well-developed.

5) How to teach students to organize whole pieces of discourse--to state a purpose or thesis clearly, to engage the reader's attention for that thesis in an introduction, to use the middle to develop parts of the thesis, and to conclude in a way which maintains the thesis's importance.

6) How to help students understand the complexities of the composition process, that any writing is done in three stages, prewriting, writing, and rewriting, and that a writer has to practice every stage.

7) At least some techniques for relating grammar, punctuation, and usage to writing, so that students are not misled into thinking of them as abstract activities, separate from composition.

8) How to teach students that research is more than just collecting note and bibliography cards--that it is the purposeful search for information to test and perhaps support an hypothesis.

9) How to teach students to write critical essays about imaginative literature, essays which express their response to a work of literature and are not just exercises in analytic criticism.

10) How to use techniques developed in the last few years--techniques of prewriting, journal keeping, and freewriting--to stimulate students to write more imaginatively.

11) How to evaluate student papers so that students are not insulted by our responses, so that they realize the important components of a paper are the quality of its ideas and its organization, and so that they can learn to correct errors and thereby become more careful evaluators of their own work.

12) That writing has both an expressive and a communicative function--that effective writers do express themselves imaginatively while they communicate effectively with their readers.

These are techniques and principles which most of us already know and can teach to secondary school teachers. I understand that there are already a few projects to do this: the Bay Area Project is the best-known one; also, the University of South Carolina has received a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to train high school teachers in the summer time. We need many more such projects. To prevent secondary school teachers from returning to a wrong set of basics--we need to teach them what the real basics are.